INTERESTING TIMES

Our Military Is Built for the Wrong Century

Ukraine and Iran have shown us that war as we've known it is over.

May 28, 2026

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The future of high-tech warfare has arrived. Just look to the conflicts in Ukraine and Iran to see how much drones and robots have remade the modern battlefield. Is the U.S. positioned to win wars in this new era? What are the ethical constraints of waging autonomous warfare? My guest this week is Christian Brose, the president and chief strategy officer of Anduril, a defense technology company building a slate of autonomous weapons and defense systems for the American military.

Below is an edited transcript of an episode of "Interesting Times." We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so using the player above or on the NYTimes app, Apple, Spotify, Amazon Music, YouTube, iHeartRadio or wherever you get your podcasts.

Ross Douthat: Chris Brose, welcome to "Interesting Times."

Chris Brose: Thank you. Great to be here.

Douthat: So it seems to me like the future of high-tech warfare has arrived, that we are living through a revolution in war fighting unlike any — at least in my own lifetime — in which drones and robots and autonomous weapons are remaking battlefields. And your professional work puts you at the center of this shift.

You are the president and chief strategy officer of Anduril, which is a defense technology company that's trying to be the hub — or a hub, at least — for autonomous warfare. But you're also someone with a deeper background in national security and American government. You worked as a policy adviser to Condoleezza Rice, to John McCain, and you're the author of a book about the high-tech military future.

So I want to start by asking you to describe where we are now, generally, to someone, let's say, who fell asleep at the end of the Iraq war and just woke up.

Brose: In order to talk about the future, we probably also have to talk about the past and present. So if you look at, I'd say, the assumptions that we have been operating under for the past 30, 40 years, I think that's what's driven the kind of military that we have.

We have assumed that if America is ever going to have to fight a war, we are going to enter the battlefield with technological superiority against any rival; that we have military primacy in the world and dominance over any potential competitor; and that if our military is called to fight, the war's not going to last very long. We're not going to shoot a lot of weapons. We're not going to lose a lot of ships and planes and other types of big military platforms.

So we have built and sized and shaped our military around exactly the kinds of systems that you would expect to flow from that assumption: Very expensive, very exquisite, very hard-to-produce military systems and weapons.

When you look at the future, I would argue that the assumptions that are now very evident to us in the present are almost the opposite of what we've built our military around. I don't think that we have the kind of military dominance that many of us

in the 1990s and early 2000s just took for granted. We have peer competitors and rivals in the world who are adapting to and really disrupting the American way of war.

I think that we are going to find a much more contested battlefield, where we're going to lose a lot of planes, ships, satellites and other things. We're going to shoot a lot of weapons, and we're going to have to replace that as an act of production over a long period of time. I think that is not a future that we're really ready for.

All of this points in the direction of autonomous systems, lower-cost systems — things that are much more like consumer technology or commercial capabilities than they are legacy military capabilities.

Douthat: And this isn't just the future you're describing. This is the present of one major ongoing war right now, the Russia-Ukraine war.

Brose: Present and recent past. I think this has been apparent going all the way back to, frankly, the Middle East in the past six or seven years. I think all of the technology that everybody is talking about, in terms of one-way attack drones and other things, were evident on the battlefields in Iraq and Yemen and Syria, going back to 2017, 2018, 2019. Then, obviously, the war in Ukraine puts this all in high relief.

It's a way of saying that we tend to have this belief in the United States that the future of war is something that's going to happen to us in 10 years, and we have a long time to get ready for it. I think it's been unfolding for years and is very much right now a present problem.

Douthat: So let's just use Ukraine as a template or a case study, because it's the biggest conflict and it's the one I think that Americans have followed the most closely.

Brose: Yeah.

Douthat: The Ukraine war starts out with Russia trying to do basically a sprint to the capital, Kyiv. Basically their equivalent, maybe, of the U.S. sprint to Baghdad.

Brose: Yeah. “Shock and awe.”

Douthat: Right. And that doesn’t work. And very quickly, the war becomes a grinding stalemate.

But how quickly do drones and autonomous weapons change the nature of that conflict? How would you describe the role that they play, for Ukraine itself especially?

Brose: I think that it is not something that happens immediately. In the early days, Russia gets bogged down, largely for reasons having to do with the character of their regime. There was an assumption that this was going to be a cakewalk, so they didn’t plan for having to operate for weeks and months and years.

It was only, I think, once the battlefield lines hardened and you began to see both sides struggling to advance and gain ground. It basically becomes a hider/finder problem, and it became very difficult to hide on that battlefield. So things like tube artillery became increasingly risky bets to make. That’s where I think you started to see attack drones really taking the lion’s share of the burden in terms of the killing that they were doing and being critical to military operations, which they are today.

Douthat: For someone who hasn’t watched a video of an attack drone in action, which you can in fact watch on the internet, what does a one-way attack drone do? Describe a typical mission for one on the Ukrainian-Russian front.

Brose: There’s going to be different kinds, for sure. These are small hand-carry drones that you can fly either autonomously or human-piloted. They have quite capable sensors on them, in terms of being able to fly over an area and identify people or military systems that you want to strike.

And most of those systems have been weaponized — they’re carrying small amounts of explosives, so you can then literally just fly them into the target. You see these horrible videos on YouTube of Russian or Ukrainian soldiers running away from these drones that are chasing them down, horror movie style.

And then I think you see the larger, more complex operations that both sides have also innovated in conducting, where they have larger drones that look more like missiles, and other drones that fly out in advance of them and do a kind of targeting, spotting of targets, feeding that information back. These larger drones are operating more like precision-strike weapons.

So the ability to have these systems that are out there on their own looking for targets, identifying systems or personnel and then are able to fly out and strike those targets with precision, and do it all at a price that's affordable — I mean, that is how Ukraine has stayed in the fight for over four years. They would not have been able to do this otherwise.

Douthat: Is there a near future where infantry itself starts to be obsolete and you literally just have drones and robots maneuvering against each other? Or is that still further out into the hypothetical?

Brose: I think that's further out, if it's ever something that becomes feasible, simply because, so long as human beings continue to live on and inhabit the Earth — which I'm pretty sure we're going to do for the indefinite future — I think it becomes very difficult for these types of robotic systems to entirely go in, take and then hold ground. We've seen plenty in the war in Ukraine that militaries can be, at various different times in the battle, adept at taking ground. It's the holding of it that becomes very difficult.

The question then becomes: Can those gains be solidified? Can those gains be held entirely through nonhuman means? That's not a bet that I would make at the moment.

Douthat: Let's talk about Iran, because this is a war that the United States is directly involved in.

Brose: Yes.

Douthat: We're not just funding and observing as we are in Ukraine. How much of the specifics of the Iranian stalemate are connected to technological change?

Brose: I would argue that Iran is still in the fight in large part because of the sort of technological systems that we're talking about. If you believe public reporting, we've done an enormous amount of military damage. The claims of sinking their navy and destroying their air force and destroying their air defense systems, of going after their military-industrial capacity — a lot of that's happened.

At the same time, the war is continuing because they're still capable of building, fielding and using one-way attack drones. These kinds of robotic drone boats that are quite effective in threatening the Strait of Hormuz and keeping that area of the world closed — these systems are largely the reason I think that they're still able to project power and still able to hazard the United States, our allies and partners in the region.

This could all change in a week because of the nature of how quickly these things change.

Douthat: I know you're not inside government, but do you think that the Pentagon was prepared for the kind of responses that Iran has offered to us? Do you think that this has gone as the military expected, and maybe it's just the political side that didn't anticipate it? What's your take?

Brose: I have a hard time imagining that if the premise of this was "we're going to very quickly decapitate the leadership, strike, and they're going to sue for peace" — it might happen, but I think the whole nature of a military is to plan for the worst-case scenario. So I have to imagine that that kind of planning was done.

The reality is we are still in the fight. We are still striking targets. We are still conducting the military operations that the military's been focused on. But when you look very closely at the statements of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, about munitions inventory, he'll say:

Archival clip of Dan Caine: *Well, sir, we have sufficient munitions for what we're tasked to do right now, that's what I hear from the COCOMs, but what I will say is that we always want more. So I appreciate the effort of this committee and the Congress, we're always gonna want more munitions.*

The premise or assumption being that if somehow that changes, or if the military objectives change, or if the conflict lengthens, that might be a different situation.

I think that there are certain things that Iran has been doing that were pretty easy to forecast. Closing the Strait of Hormuz was something that the U.S. military has been worried about for a very long time. The ability to project power through one-way attack drones, etc. — this is something that they've been doing, again, for a very long time.

I think you can take issue with how we've responded to that, which suggests maybe we weren't as ready as we needed to be, and that maybe there are things that we needed to be doing — learning the lessons of Ukraine ourselves and changing the way that we build our military to be ready for these kinds of disruptions. But it is clearly not creating the political outcome or the military outcome that at least, again, through public statements from the leadership of our country, was the intent going into this.

Douthat: Let's talk about American military readiness, in general. There's a lot of talk about how the U.S. is burning through its stockpile of missiles and munitions.

Brose: Yeah.

Douthat: War with Iran is not a major great power war.

Brose: No.

Douthat: It's not war with Russia. It's not war with the People's Republic of China. Looking at what's played out in the Persian Gulf over the last month, and looking at trends generally, is the U.S. prepared for a major war?

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Brose: If you look at it narrowly in the question of munition stockpiles, which is a pretty important indicator of military preparedness, I would say no. And this has been known to us for a very long time. I think the deeper question is: Why is that, and how do we fix it?

In the opening days and weeks of Operation Epic Fury in Iran, what I've read publicly is that we fired something like eight years' worth of Tomahawk missile production. That's an exquisite weapon. It does remarkable things. The problem is that it takes a very long time to build, and once you shoot it, it takes time to replace. And we don't have an infinite supply of them.

So if you look at why we are not ready for this, it goes back to the comment I made at the beginning, which is the assumptions that we've made about warfare. Our assumptions are that we would not have to fight protracted conflicts. We have assumed that we would get into a war, we would enter the battlefield with dominance — with all of this exquisite military capability — and the war would be over very quickly. The fact that we don't have deep inventories of munitions, for example, is not something that we'd have to worry about.

And again, this has been known for a long time, so ——

Douthat: I guess my sense had been, and you can tell me why this is wrong, that the goal of the U.S. military was supposed to be to fight at least one protracted war. And there would be controversy back and forth about whether we are capable of fighting more than one. Like, are we capable of fighting Russia and China simultaneously?

But it seems like ——

Brose: The goal was one major regional or theater war. There was nothing said about the duration of that war.

Douthat: OK.

Brose: So when you look at national defense strategies going all the way back decades or so — for instance, how big do we have to build the military? What's the shape of the military we have to build? — it was all built around this idea that we had to be able to fight two major regional conflicts at once, and then that got downgraded to one. But the assumption was that those conflicts were going to be over very quickly.

Back to your question on munitions, over the past ten years, as a country, we've actually tripled the amount of spending that we're putting into Patriot missiles and Tomahawk and these kinds of weapons that now have household names. The challenge is that even as that spending has gone up 200 percent, 300 percent, production has not moved in a commensurate fashion. It's gone 14 percent, 23 percent up. And you can go critical munition by critical munition and see that we're putting a significant amount of resources in, and we're not getting significant or commensurate amounts of production out.

To me, the problem is they are remarkable pieces of technology, and we need them to do what they are uniquely built to do, but they're effectively artisanal products. They're luxury goods.

Over the past 30 or 40 years, we have had a predominantly high-end military — a very exquisite military — and its systems that we all are very familiar with. It's all of these weapons that we talk about. It's F-35s, it's aircraft carriers, it's submarines — and we need that. I'm not here suggesting that we can just do away with all of that. And I don't think that the war in Ukraine has rendered that stuff obsolete.

Douthat: Can we just pause? Because you've used the word "exquisite" now a number of times. And you don't mean, I think, "exquisitely beautiful" like a Ming vase. What is an exquisite weapon?

Brose: The way I use "exquisite" — and others may define it differently — it means it is something that is very scarce. It is very hard to produce. It is something that you're never going to have a lot of. It is going to be very technologically sophisticated or difficult to make.

The problem is we can't do only that. And I think you're now starting to see, in the Pentagon, the leadership recognizing that you need what's referred to as a "high-low mix." You need all the high-end stuff, but you also need this lower-end of capabilities that are going to be more producible, more affordable, oftentimes more autonomous.

I think the lesson of history, and really, the lesson of these recent and ongoing conflicts, is that these technologies are going to change warfare constantly. And you're now dealing with adversaries that are quite capable, quite sophisticated, quite high-tech in their own right, very disruptive — and that what we are going to field is inherently going to give us a fleeting advantage.

That, I think, is the real lesson that we're going to have to take out of this. It's not over-indexing on a particular piece of technology or a particular way of fighting an old system or a new system — it's how do we consistently stay at the cutting edge, learn and field?

That is, I think, what has made the Ukrainians so effective, and where the United States military, frankly, still has a lot to learn. And the U.S. bureaucracy that supports that military definitely has a lot to learn.

Douthat: All right. So, Anduril. It's a Tolkien reference. To what? I know the answer, but some people might not.

Brose: So the name is a conscious nerd detector. We have identified you as such. The reference, Andúril, is Aragorn's sword in "The Lord of the Rings." "The Flame of the West" is, I think, the Elven translation.

Douthat: Narsil reforged.

Brose: Exactly.

Douthat: It's a broken blade that's been reforged.

Brose: Correct. And there is an active debate about the proper pronunciation, of ANN-dur-ril or AHN-dur-ril.

Douthat: How do you say it?

Brose: Look, I'm a pretty conventional guy.

Douthat: You're not a native Elvish speaker?

Brose: Suburban Philadelphia, so it's ANN-dur-ril to me. I think others might insist that the proper Elven pronunciation is AHN-dur-ril. These are the fights we have.

Douthat: I'm glad we *haven't* clarified that question. So having a military-industrial company named for something in "The Lord of the Rings" is something that you obviously have in common with Palantir.

Brose: Yeah.

Douthat: Another cutting-edge military technology company, one of whose representatives has been a guest on this very show.

You're both contractors doing work for the Pentagon. Sometimes you work on the same project. How are you different?

Brose: It's a great question, and I think it's very easy to think that we're the same. Putting aside the name, we have common DNA in the company, common investors. We're both fundamentally software-centric companies.

We're just not working with a lot of the customers that Palantir is working with. We don't work with the I.R.S. or Health and Human Services, because what we do is just not relevant to them.

I think the obvious difference is that Anduril is also building hardware. We're building sensors, drones, autonomous systems, weapons. We're actually doing that manufacturing.

And the software that we're building is a software system that we call Lattice, which is actually very tightly integrated and coupled with that hardware in the sense that it is fundamentally focused on the autonomous operation of machines and robotic systems. How an individual drone, for example, is perceiving its

environment, maneuvering through space, identifying objects of interest, moving information and collaborating with other robots, with all that software having to run inside of that robot.

To get concrete about it, we do a lot of work in counterdrone and air defense. And what Lattice has to do as a software system — what we have to do as a company — is actually be able to take the information that's coming out of those sensors — radar feeds and imagery from cameras and signals intelligence from electronic warfare systems — and the software has to be able to build an understanding of the world. It has to build objects of interest, transform data into objects and targets, to differentiate a bird from a drone or an airplane from a missile or a civilian airplane from a military airplane.

Then, having done that, it needs to be able to communicate with those machines and tell them to keep custody of that target, to keep looking at it, to be able to track it through space and time so that the system — the software system — can then task a weapon to go shoot it or defeat it, if that's the intent of the human operator. So it's just to say that this kind of system is what the military would refer to as a fire-control system, because you are literally controlling acts of violence through software.

And this is why you look at the OpenAIs and the Googles and others — I mean, we have natural relationships and partnerships with all these companies. They're incredibly eager to work with us because we have a treasure trove of unique military data that you're not going to find in a public setting. You're not going to scrape it off the Internet.

Douthat: But you're also building the weapons themselves.

Brose: Correct.

Douthat: So you're building the model through which soldiers and operators interface with drones and counterdrone technology.

Brose: Yes.

Douthat: But you're also building drones and counterdrone technology.

Brose: We're also building hardware. Right.

Douthat: So, describe the hardware. Give me a couple examples, offensive and defensive, of the hardware and what a typical product looks like.

Brose: One of the bigger systems that we're building right now is an Air Force program that we competed on and won called the Collaborative Combat Aircraft, which is a fancy way of basically saying a robotic fighter jet. So, fully autonomous, launching entirely without human control, maneuvering through the battle space, conducting operations under the supervision of human beings, firing weapons, and again, doing all of this over very long ranges, carrying large amounts of payload, sensors, weapons and other things.

That is the kind of system that we're building that is both a very unique and differentiated piece of hardware. But what makes it special is everything that is smart and intelligent that's going on inside of it, which is foundational, and that's what the Lattice software system is doing.

Douthat: Is that cheaper than the alternative? Is that an example of the kind of lower-cost warfare that you were just talking about?

Brose: Yeah. That's what it means.

Douthat: Because that sounds very high-end to me.

Brose: It is high-end, but I think this is where ——

Douthat: Even exquisite.

Brose: There are many things that we're doing that I would say are exquisite, but that also doesn't mean that they're exorbitant in terms of their price or in terms of the time it takes to produce them or change them or modify them. This is an incredibly capable system, but it is a fraction of the cost of an F-35, for example.

Douthat: OK.

Brose: And the whole notion is that it is an unmanned or an uncrewed or autonomous system, so that you can take risks with it that you would never take with a $100-million airplane that has a human soul aboard. This isn't a robot that is going to necessarily replace human beings and exquisite military systems. It's going to make those systems more capable and more survivable because you can collaborate with them. You can not just send a single pilot in a single fighter jet out to conduct an operation — you can have that pilot flying with three or four or five of these robotic wingmen who are now capable of operating almost as, you know, wingmen.

Douthat: Why do you need the pilot at all, though? We can get into the question of whether you need any humans in the system in a minute, but if this works, aren't you replacing, at the very least, Tom Cruise?

Brose: I mean, maybe someday. I don't think that's where we are now. And I would argue it's probably not going to be the case that we're going to replace humans entirely in the future. But why do you need humans now? Because the systems are not advanced enough that they can just operate completely without human supervision. You need a human being that is going to be in command of those robotic systems in the way that a human in a fighter jet is going to be collaborating with those robotic aircraft.

Douthat: But is there an advantage specifically to having the human be in the fighter jet with his wingmen?

Brose: I would argue there is.

Douthat: Or could you have them just in the command center piloting from afar?

Brose: I think that there's an advantage that comes from the human being in that same operational environment and being closer. In a world where we're seeing jamming and denial of communications, the ability to have an aircraft that is physically in communications with those airplanes, even as they are operating in highly autonomous ways, I do think is a necessity in terms of how we are going to think about the ethical use of this technology. I think that's important.

I also think the military advantage is that you look at this more — I look at this more — as the augmentation of human beings with intelligent systems or robotic systems. Ultimately, it's not a question of whether the human is better or the machine is better, but is the human-machine team actually more effective than either the robot or the human by itself?

And I think a lot of the analysis that we've run, and a lot of the analysis that we've seen from the government, is that that is absolutely the case.

Douthat: What about on defense? In terms of both drone and missile defense, give me an example of work you're doing.

Brose: So air defense is an inherently integrated problem, which is why it's referred to as integrated air and missile defense. You are basically needing to do what I was describing a minute ago, which is you have to complete actual kill chains. So the ability to understand what's happening in the environment, be able to identify and target the systems that you want to defeat, and then be able to task weapons or military effects, kinetic or nonkinetic, to defeat those threats and do all of that in a matter of seconds, to operate it at a speed that a human being is not going to be able to keep up with.

One of the systems that has done remarkably well in protecting American bases and American aircraft in Operation Epic Fury is the electronic warfare system that we built called Pulsar.

Douthat: Take that example. You're trying to defend, let's say, a U.S. base in the Middle East. So that is trying to shoot down both missiles and drone attacks?

Brose: So this is doing this in what the military would refer to as nonkinetically.

Douthat: How would you or I refer to it?

Brose: It is preventing a weapon from being able to strike its target by using energy, using the electromagnetic spectrum, to disrupt its operations. At the most basic level, that is what it is. And to get more technical, it begins to sound like witchcraft because it mostly is.

Douthat: So you're not firing interceptors?

Brose: We're also doing that. Basically, this is a military interceptor that is going to launch from a base, that is going to fly out in much the same way that an air defense weapon will. It is going to be able to identify a target, to physically run into it and explode and knock it out of the air.

Douthat: Say a little more about the witchcraft, though. Let's say I'm running a U.S. military base in the Middle East, and I have a set of drones — Iranian drones — heading towards me. On the one hand, I have as countermeasures my set of maybe ideally reusable rockets that will intercept and take them down. And so some subset of the incoming fire is taken out by that, and then some subset is disrupted through electromagnetic fields?

Brose: Yeah. It's basically what the military would refer to as a layered defense. I think that traditionally we've thought of air and missile defense as very point-specific — I'm trying to defend a very small piece of real estate, a military base, and the volume of threats that I have to defend it against is not very large.

And I think what we've seen is that with the proliferation of these one-way attack drones in Ukraine and Iran, air defense is shifting into more area defense. You have to be able to protect very large areas of territory — whole cities, whole regions — and it just requires a much larger volume of sensors, a far larger volume of weapons, and it basically requires you to integrate everything.

So the first thing that you're going to do, once you see an air defense threat, once you see an inbound missile or a one-way attack drone, is hopefully not shoot a Patriot missile at it — you're going to deploy something like what I'm talking about in the Pulsar system, which is an electronic warfare system. It's reusable. It is essentially trying to defeat inbound threats with jamming, with energy.

Douthat: Is it shooting something up?

Brose: No, it's a directed energy weapon.

Douthat: It's creating fields around …?

Brose: It's a force field, Ross. It's effectively a force field.

Douthat: That's what I want you to say. There you go. Yes.

Brose: So for the listeners, it is a force field. We have done it. The next up will be cloaking devices.

Douthat: But it functions like there is a zone of electromagnetic interference and missiles or drones enter this?

Brose: It's more targeted than that. It's not trying to basically just pump huge volumes of energy out into the environment and do kind of broad-spectrum jamming.

Douthat: So then, the second layer would be things that come in, and then you start ——

Brose: If that didn't work for some reason, then you start shooting.

Douthat: But this is what's being used now?

Brose: This is being used now, across the world.

Douthat: For instance, does Israel's Iron Dome use the directed energy?

Brose: We are not currently a part of their program, but I have to imagine that Israel has similar capabilities that they're fielding as part of Iron Dome.

Douthat: And long run, be speculative — this is obviously designed for base defense. In Israel's case, you have missile defense geared around cities and regions. Do you imagine this long-term as a version of or an upgrade of missile defense for the American homeland? Is there a world where this ends up being sort of a means of derailing a nuclear attack, or is that just in a completely different realm of threat?

Brose: Yeah, I think the nuclear realm is just a wholly different animal. But in terms of being able to protect military bases or critical infrastructure from drone attacks here in the United States, we're doing a lot of that work as a company. The

electronic warfare system that I mentioned is part of that work, but it is a much larger problem that again gets back to the question of how we do this kind of air defense mission at scale.

Douthat: How hard is it to get this to actually work? And here, I'm just going to throw at you — and you can respond to any of them — some examples of publicly reported Anduril failures.

So there's reporting that Ukraine used some of your drones and then stopped using them after a certain period of time because there were battlefield failures. There are specific case studies, like one of your counterdrone system tests in Oregon reportedly sparked a 22-acre wildfire. There was an engine-related failure to one of your autonomous fighter prototypes, Fury.

Those would be examples. How well does this stuff work? And how hard is it to get it to actually work?

Brose: Yeah, without relitigating the individual incidents, because the engine fire just didn't happen, and we corrected the misimpression that a reporter had because it had been fed wrong information ——

Douthat: Well, how about ——

Brose: The bigger point is we fail every single day. Right? I mean, that's the tip of the iceberg in terms of the failures that we experience as a company. But that's, I think, the whole point here.

The answer to your question of how hard it is to make this stuff work — it is incredibly hard. It is far harder than people realize. And for that reason, we have invested as a company. This is our own money. This is not money that the taxpayer is funding us to do. At this point, I think we have about 330,000 acres of test sites and ranges across the United States that ——

Douthat: Where are those?

Brose: Undisclosed locations.

Douthat: OK. Mostly in the West?

Brose: In places where you can afford to have large amounts of space.

Douthat: Not in Connecticut? Just for my own ——

Brose: Um, no.

Douthat: OK.

Brose: But if you want to open a test site in Connecticut, Ross, we should talk. It could be your side hustle.

Douthat: OK.

Brose: It's to say that we go out every single day and break these systems. We figure out what their capabilities and limitations are. We develop them to the point where they are going to be trusted by an operator that's going to use them, but even then, the expectation cannot be that when a system shows up in Ukraine, it's going to work immediately.

And I think that is an experience that any company that has been operating in Ukraine since the beginning of the war, which we have — and the military systems that we've been fielding are still in operations in Ukraine — no one has had an experience where they fielded something that has just been perfect and worked out of the box. And to the extent that it did, it didn't work a week later or a month later or a couple of months after that.

Again, the whole lesson of this is not whether we can build a perfect piece of technology. It's whether we actually have the right institutional culture or organizational culture where we are learning, we are testing, we are training these systems, we are building trust in them, we are enabling operators to build trust in them, and when those systems don't work — because they won't — because of things that new technology makes possible or responses that our adversaries engage in, we have to be able to modernize those systems and improve them and change them and rebuild them.

And that's what we do every single day. We're integrating new sensors and new payloads onto these systems. We're rebuilding entire systems altogether at a hardware level. Entirely new versions of aircraft are another thing.

Douthat: And actual war is an accelerant.

Brose: It is.

Douthat: Both the Ukraine war and the Iran war are accelerants of this technology's development.

Brose: Yes. At least it should be. At a technical level, it's an accelerant because you are in a nonfail environment where you have to perform and you have to get better, and it's all mission-critical.

That kind of incentive is exactly the kind of pressure that we want to be under because, at the end of the day, we are building autonomous systems. And autonomous systems are by nature very finicky. You take them into one environment, and they perceive the world differently. You take them into a different environment, and you have to do a certain amount of retraining.

All of this ultimately comes down to the trust that human beings are going to place in them, so if those systems are not predictable and reliable, if they don't do things in a repeated and high-trust way, operators are just not going to use them.

There's no points for being autonomous. There's points for being effective and for being useful. Autonomy is a means to that end in our mind.

Douthat: What about the capacity to build the kind of things you're building at scale? You're one company.

Brose: Yeah.

Douthat: You said earlier, basically, that under current conditions, we can spend a lot of money, and with the existing legacy weapon systems we have, we just don't get that large a number of missiles, and so on.

Does the U.S. have the existing industrial capacity to build out autonomous weapons — drones and other things — on the scale that we need in an environment where you've just said that we aren't maybe well positioned to win a major war?

Brose: I think the answer is yes and no. I think the yes answer is we absolutely have the ability to stand up industrial infrastructure and bring the work force in. These are not problems that we're concerned about. We just closed another fund-raising round, so we're taking in $5 billion of private capital.

Douthat: By the way, you mentioned earlier the venture capital role here — this is a different model from the traditional defense contractor, right?

Brose: Yes.

Douthat: You are effectively raising money, building weapons, and presenting them to the Pentagon before a contract is signed?

Brose: In part. There are plenty of instances where we have conviction in a solution that needs to be built to solve a military or national security problem, and we go out and do exactly that. We put our own money at risk, we spin up a team, we build a system, and we take that system to the government and say: You probably wouldn't have come up with this on your own, but we think that it is an answer to your problem.

As we've become a larger company, we've also had to change the business model and engage in different bets, which I would argue makes it start to look much more like the commercial economy that we're all familiar with, which is: If you give me a contract to build weapons the traditional way of doing it, the government is going to pay the provider of that traditional weapon all of the costs to build their facilities, to hire their people, to cover the overruns when the program goes over budget and off schedule. The taxpayer's on the hook for all of that, and the industry partner really isn't bearing a lot of that risk.

I think what is changing now, and I think Anduril has done a lot to change it — but I also give a lot of credit to the current leadership of the Pentagon that's trying to change this business model as well — is let's try to make this more like a

commercial transaction, where I sell weapons and you want weapons. You give me a contract to build a lot of weapons, I'm going to go off and build those weapons. If I am off schedule or if I underperform or if I'm behind, that's all on me, and I'm the one that has to eat the cost of that failure in order to meet the obligations of my contract. The same way that you would put a roof on your house or go buy a piece of electronics technology.

Douthat: Well, except that, unless you start selling to other countries, it's a market with only one buyer.

Brose: It is ——

Douthat: Which means that you are, as a company, in a position where you are sort of at the mercy of political changes, political decisions.

I want to ask about this because Palantir, again, has a higher profile than you do, and has a specific political profile. There's lots of people who hate and fear Palantir, who associate it with general fears about the surveillance state, but also specific fears or concerns about its alignment with Republican politics — the Trump administration, and so on.

I think this is less of an issue for Anduril — see? I did the Tolkien pronunciation there. But your prominent founder, Palmer Luckey, is a prominent Republican. Obviously, there is overlap with Palantir — you yourself have mentioned it. One of the funds investing in you is connected to Donald Trump Jr.

Is there a world where your business model just goes away in a Democratic administration? Like, "Anduril — those were the Trump guys or the Pete Hegseth guys." How vulnerable are you to politics?

Brose: No, I personally don't think that we are that vulnerable. I think that from Day 1, we recognized that Anduril is a defense company, and defense is a long game. You have to be able to play that long game not knowing what the future politics of the country are going to hold.

For us, politics is something that individuals can engage in. Palmer certainly has his political profile. Our CEO is a very public and avowed Democrat. I have no idea what I am anymore. But it's to say that it doesn't matter.

At the end of the day, what we're focused on as a company, we are actually engaged in a bipartisan way across both houses of Congress, both parties, to provide an enduring capacity in this country, to build the kinds of defense technologies and capabilities that I think, on both sides of the aisle, people want.

Douthat: So let's say that vision is right, and you become an enduring part of the defense industrial base, and the next president is a Democrat. It doesn't matter — you're doing the work you want to do. And we get into the early 2030s, and we get into a war with China over Taiwan. Give me a brief vision of what Anduril's success looks like in that environment. What actually happens?

Brose: First and foremost, the actual success that we measure ourselves by as a company is whether we prevent that war from ever happening.

Douthat: Sure. OK.

Brose: I know you get it — table stakes. But it needs to be said. Because, look, we are a defense company. We do build military technology. But we're not excited for it to be ——

Douthat: Then put it this way: Describe the scenario that China would fear that would induce them not to go to war.

Brose: So some specific things, because I think the specifics are what is interesting. Ultimately, we want to contribute to America's ability to defeat their strategy. And their strategy is, I think — not reading their internal emails or what have you — they want to prevent us from being able to project power. They want to prevent us from being able to come to the aid of our allies and partners in the region, whether it's Taiwan, Japan or someone else. And they want to be able to endure through what could be a protracted conflict by keeping us out of it.

Douthat: That means, concretely, they want to, initially, destroy our bases and drive our aircraft carriers out of the region.

Brose: They say it very clearly. They say it is winning without fighting. They want to prevent us from being able to fight, and that is the sort of deep disruption that has been happening to the United States military for the past 30 to 35 years. China went to school on us in terms of how we fight and with what we fight, and they have been building up and modernizing a military to hold all of that at risk.

So, specifically, we want to be able to break that advantage. We want to make the bases and ships and aircraft carriers that are going to be under threat in that region defensible, having larger numbers of robotic systems that are purpose-built for the Indo-Pacific region.

I think a lot of people look at the war in Ukraine and say: On the one hand, we just need to buy everything that the Ukrainians are building, quadcopters and others. Or on the other hand ——

Douthat: Or have the Taiwanese buy them.

Brose: Well, I'll get to the Taiwan question and the allied question in a second. But the criticism of people who over-index on the war in Ukraine is: Oh, none of this stuff is relevant in the Indo-Pacific region. The distances are too vast. The geography is so large. The threat from the Chinese is so much greater.

And there's a degree to which that's true. I think the point is that what we actually need to be doing is what we're doing as a company, which is not just carbon copying what the Ukrainians are doing, but learning the lessons of that battlefield and the attributes of those technologies and building different kinds of military systems that are purpose-built for the United States and its allies, for different geographies, and for a far higher bar of threat that we would be facing from the Chinese Communist Party.

And specifically to your question about Taiwan, because these are the places where you have the flash points of conflict where a conflict might emerge, I think that we have to do our best to support the Taiwanese government in making themselves

more defensible, making themselves into the kind of adversary that is so distasteful that the Chinese military and the Chinese political leadership just doesn't want to take that on.

So looking at this as ——

Douthat: And that means, like, drone swarms when you have an attempted amphibious landing?

Brose: Yeah, making them more defensible from the types of inbound missiles, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, one-way attack drones that they're going to be faced with, giving them the ability to defend against and endure that sort of onslaught. The ability to project power in a way that keeps them in the fight.

That is work that Anduril is doing. We're providing that capability — obviously with the U.S. government's blessing — directly to the Taiwanese armed forces. And it's something that we intend to do a lot more, provided that they have the will and the means, and the U.S. government continues to back us in doing that.

Douthat: Let's end with the ethics of this strange new world. You talked earlier about emphasizing the idea of keeping humans in the loop, keeping humans involved. What are your actual core principles as a company when it comes to what is allowed to happen autonomously in a conflict area?

Brose: My general frustration with the ethical debate right now is that it feels very unsophisticated and stale. On one side, you have folks who basically are looking at the reality of the security dilemma that we face, which is that our adversaries are going to do all of this. They're going to build these autonomous systems, they're going to take human beings out of the loop, and they're going to gain a military advantage. And if we don't do that, we'll be on our back foot. And there's a degree to which that's real.

Douthat: By the way, in the case of Ukraine right now, you have drones killing people without a human in the loop already, right?

Brose: Again, I don't know everything that's going on there. I actually think a lot of what you've seen more recently is you don't have that. You have drones that are being piloted by very capable drone pilots that are the ones flying them into their targets, whether those targets are people, soldiers, or military systems. I don't think that you are seeing a large amount of automation yet on the battlefield, but I think that, too, could change.

If the Ukrainians start building up more of an internal capacity to shoot longer-range one-way attack drones in volume deeper into Russia, you're probably going to have to automate more of the operations of those systems.

Douthat: Then you would be just sending them out and saying: Go until you see something to kill and kill it.

Brose: That is a version of it. And again, to go back to your question about the ethics, I think on the other side are folks who look at this and say: This technology is so new, it's so unprecedented, that we just have to ban it outright. We just have to never go there — and I think that that's also not a sophisticated position.

To answer your question directly, what I think we try to stay focused on as a company is the reality that over the past decades and, I would argue, centuries, Western civilization — the United States in particular — has built up a body of laws and policies and doctrine that enables us to bring brand-new technology into military use, to weaponize it and to use it in a way that is still ethically constrained and thought about in a serious and ethical way.

What we need to be doing a better job of as a country is not throwing out this remarkable body of ethical thinking and action and doctrine that we've built up, but actually applying it to govern how these technologies are being built and introduced to military operations. There's nothing to me that is so new and so unique and so unprecedented about these technologies that the ethical frameworks that we have brought to bear to solve past problems can't enable us to solve these future problems.

Douthat: OK. That's very general, though. I want you to make this concrete. What's your understanding of the constraints on what the Pentagon allows a drone or an autonomous weapon to do without a human deciding, "Kill this person, shoot this person"?

Brose: So if you look at the actual policy, it's a very serious document, but it's also quite broad, and it would account for a lot of things. I actually think that's right and well and good.

I think that people also need to realize ——

Douthat: Wait, wait, wait. But what does it say? I know it's very broad, but is there a specific——

Brose: The more important thing is what it doesn't say. It doesn't say you're not allowed to automate the kill chain. It doesn't say that you're not allowed to build a military system that is capable of basically being a lethal autonomous weapon.

Douthat: So you're allowed to do that?

Brose: You're not *not* allowed to do that.

Douthat: Right.

Brose: I think the point is that people also have to appreciate that bureaucracies by nature, and military bureaucracies in particular, are inherently conservative. And I think that it's a fundamental misunderstanding — and I'm not saying that you're guilty of this, but I think that many are ——

Douthat: I could be guilty of it. That's OK.

Brose: It's a misunderstanding of our defense institution that they're just going to take a bunch of unproven technology and then willy-nilly throw it onto the battlefield and see what happens. Because at the end of the day, what they are accountable for and the consequences of their work is life and death. Not just life and death with respect to enemy combatants and civilians, but also for our own personnel.

You don't want a weapon system that malfunctions. You don't want a drone or an autonomous system that hallucinates. So there is a process that all new technology has to go through.

And I think that it is going to be no different in the case of these kinds of more highly intelligent, highly autonomous robotic systems, where you are going to rigorously train them to do very specific things. You're going to test them to determine that they actually perform those tasks the right way, effectively, repeatedly, predictably. And in the process of that training and testing, you're going to build trust that those systems are safe to use and effective to use.

Douthat: And where in that process do you determine where the moral line is for letting robots kill people?

Brose: So to take a specific point of differentiation, how I would answer your question would be very different in a defensive application of this technology than an offensive application.

If I'm going to take a highly intelligent machine and send it downrange to go hunt targets and basically make its own decisions about what to do, what to shoot, etc., there's going to be a far higher bar applied to letting that system go off and do those things than a similar system would be if it were employed in a defensive setting, like an air defense application we talked about, where the risk of not doing that is that the human beings that are under threat from those inbound missiles will be too slow and too incapable of being able to defend themselves.

So you're going to be far more willing to put that kind of advanced technology into a defensive use case because you're literally protecting human life, as opposed to an offensive case where you're sending that system out to take human life.

Douthat: Is there a world where the military, for offensive warfare, has a policy that human beings have to be in the loop, but in effect, this technology is so fast and you're so caught up in the operations of artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons that the human being ends up being just sort of a rubber stamp? Because

that seems like a possible future, too, that you technically maintain humans in the kill chain, but in practice, you never want to be the midlevel soldier who says no to what the A.I. is telling you to do.

Brose: Yeah, I think here, too, it's also highly contextual. I absolutely can imagine a world where we build lethal autonomous weapons and we use them exactly as you were describing.

Again, back to this ethical framework — when the United States military goes to war, we will declare what are called areas of active hostilities. And what you're saying to the world is: This is a war zone. Do not go there. If you're a commercial fisherman or a commercial mariner, do not take your ship through there, do not fly your aircraft through there, because this is going to be an area where we are lowering the bar for how we are going to use violence, or we are going to delegate more of our military operations to intelligent machines in order to gain that advantage or not lose that advantage.

But you are doing so in a context that you've created that gives you much higher assurance that you're not going to be making mistakes, killing civilians, killing your own people.

I apologize for continuing to come back to the context and the specifics, but I think that's where all the devils lie in these kinds of ethical discussions of these new technologies.

Douthat: So then, two last questions on that. Just from your perspective, as someone who is making weapons for the military but who does not work for the military, does the private company that does this kind of work with the military just have to accept as the basis for doing business that you are trusting the military in these specific circumstances?

Because this is obviously something that's come up a lot with the big A.I. companies, which are not defense contractors, but now kind of are defense contractors — and famously, Anthropic maybe had problems with how the

Pentagon might use its A.I., and this led to conflict between the Pentagon and Anthropic — what's your view of the place of the private company doing this work in thinking about how the weapons are actually used?

Brose: Yeah. I think working with or working for the government is kind of an all-or-nothing venture. And I think that's how it should be. I don't think that we ever want the builders of technology in America to basically enact a veto over how our government is using that technology. I think that is a decision that needs to remain in the hands of the American people and their elected representatives.

And I think that for companies that want to work with the government, that's what you're signing up for. You are signing up for the belief that working for our government is inherently good, it is something that is necessary and right, and that you are believing that the government is going to be following the laws of the land. It's going to be constrained by the checks and balances of the Constitution and our other institutions of government, but you can't show up and try to veto individual use cases.

As a builder of weapons in the United States, I can't show up to the Pentagon and say: You can buy my weapons, but you can't give them to Israel, you can't shoot them in Yemen, you can't provide them to the American military in Operation Epic Fury or share them with the Taiwanese or the Europeans.

You basically have to say: Look, I am here to provide a capability or a service, and I am trusting that the government is going to make policy, they're going to follow the law, they're going to be checked and balanced and constrained by the other institutions of our government.

That's, I think, what you're signing up for. If a private actor, a company or a person doesn't believe that they can support their government in that way, providing them that technology or service, the right thing to do is just to walk away and not do that work.

And there are plenty of companies in America that choose not to engage in defense or choose not to provide capability to the government. And that is, I think, an absolutely ethically supportable decision. And I think it's a good thing that in America we have that choice, we have that luxury.

So I think, yeah, where Anthropic went wrong — and there's plenty of blame to go around — I don't believe we want these kinds of technology companies, including us at Anduril, showing up and trying to dictate to our elected representatives, our leaders, our Senate-confirmed officials and ultimately the American people what they can and can't do with the technologies that we're building.

Douthat: Stipulating that that's true and that that's just inevitably going to be the necessary approach that you take, I'm just curious, as a last question, whether there's anything concrete that you fear with this technology.

And I'll just say, as context, the pattern in major wars in most of human history, especially where technology is involved, is that you get in a major war, it goes on a long time, and you escalate the use of new technology to a threshold of moral danger. This could be poison gas in World War I. It could be the strategic bombing of cities and the use of nuclear weapons in World War II. There are other examples. But it seems very imaginable to me that you get in a major war with autonomous weapons, and a system of moral constraint that works right now starts to go out the window.

I'm just curious: Are you ever afraid of where the things you're building could be taken?

Brose: I think you have to be. It would be irresponsible if you weren't — for me or for anybody who is working in this area of technology — to fear the future use cases that these systems could be put to or the ways in which they would develop.

But I think, to your question about those future scenarios, at the end of the day, the only thing we can focus on is building the best technology that we're capable of building, to support the United States, our government, our allies and partners,

recognizing that the future use cases, the context — all of these things — are going to change and be different.

And it's hard to answer your question in the abstract because a few years prior to World War II, if anyone could even contemplate an atomic bomb, it would be hard to imagine that someone would support that as an ethical use. The point being, these things remain highly contextual and what you are willing to condone and what you're willing to do is going to change based on the circumstances that you find yourselves in.

I think the only thing that you can do as a builder of technology is, again, provide the best capability that you can, keep the United States and our allies and partners on the cutting edge of technology to try to ensure that those wars never happen. But in the event that, God forbid, we find ourselves in them, recognize that those are going to be the decisions that the elected representatives of the American people are going to have to make under very difficult circumstances, and we pray they get them right.

Douthat: All right. Chris Brose, thanks for joining me.

Brose: Thank you. Great to be here.

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Thoughts? Email us at interestingtimes@nytimes.com.

This episode of "Interesting Times" was produced by Sophia Alvarez Boyd, Victoria Chamberlin and Rochelle Widdowson. It was edited by Jordana Hochman. Mixing and engineering by Pat McCusker and Efim Shapiro. Cinematography by Marina King. Video editing by Benjamin Wright. The supervising editor is Jan Kobal. The postproduction manager is Mike Puretz. Original music by Isaac Jones, Sonia Herrero, Pat McCusker and Aman Sahota. Fact-checking by Kate Sinclair and Mary Marge Locker. Audience strategy by Shannon Busta, Emma Kehlbeck and Andrea Betanzos. The executive producer is Jordana Hochman. The director of Opinion Video is Jonah M. Kessel. The deputy director of Opinion Shows is Alison Bruzek. The director of Opinion Shows is Annie-Rose Strasser. The head of Opinion is Kathleen Kingsbury.

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